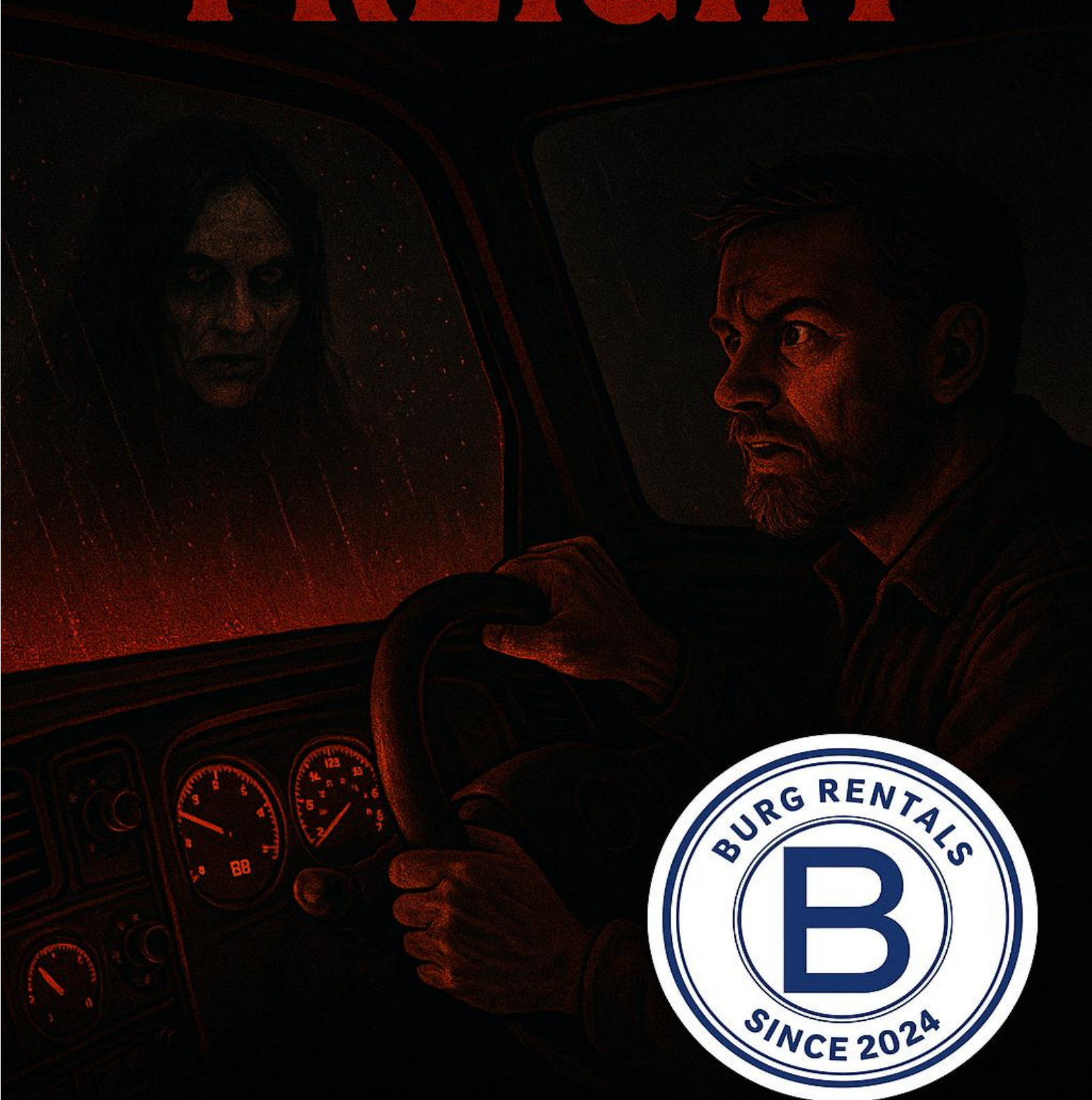


# MIDNIGHT FREIGHT



Akash Rajaraman

# Foreword

Welcome aboard, Traveler.

*Midnight Freight* is not just a novel—it's a descent into a world where cargo has conscience, time is a loop, and guilt is heavier than any payload. It is a universe suspended between horror, psychological tension, and a question humanity refuses to ask:

**“What if what we deliver comes back for us?”**

This story was born from a love for immersive narratives, high-stakes mystery, and the eeriness of roads that never seem to end. Every chapter, every turn, and every whisper in this book has been crafted to place you behind the wheel—alone, unsure, and watched.

## About the Creator

*Akash Rajaraman*

Student | Entrepreneur | Founder of BURG

Christ University, Bengaluru

Akash Rajaraman is the founder of **BURG**, a logistics and rental platform revolutionizing how commercial vehicles are accessed and used. *Midnight Freight* was developed as an exclusive experience for BURG members—bridging horror storytelling, exclusive interactive access, and limited-edition game content.

Akash believes stories should be lived, not just read. This novel accompanies the **game** of the same name—available exclusively for registered BURG users with the code **mdfreight25** (valid for 3 months). The novel expands the universe, introduces canon freight routes, and lays the foundation for future instalments in the *Manifest Universe*.

Whether you are a reader, gamer, or just a curious soul looking for a midnight thrill—**buckle in**.

Because once the rig starts rolling,  
**there are no stops.**

---

*Midnight Freight*

© 2025 Akash Rajaraman

All rights reserved.

# Index

1. **The Final Dispatch**

A lone trucker receives a mysterious late-night job: haul a sealed freight across a forgotten highway known for accidents, disappearances, and whispers of the unnatural.

2. **Static and Shadows**

As the road stretches on endlessly, strange noises crawl out of the radio. Signals cut through with coded messages, voices call out to the driver by name, and dark silhouettes appear on the roadside.

3. **Mile Marker 666**

At an unmarked junction, the truck stalls. A gas station that shouldn't exist appears — and disappears — leaving behind something... attached to the trailer.

4. **Phantom Convoy**

The truck is no longer alone. Headlights follow from behind, but there are no engines, no drivers — only silence and something knocking from inside the sealed freight.

5. **The Illusion Engine**

Reality bends. The trucker wakes up in a world that mimics his past but twists his memories into nightmares. The road ahead becomes a loop of fear and hallucinations.

6. **Breakdown in Nowhere**

A mechanical failure forces the trucker to walk — and what he finds in the forest off the highway are remnants of those who never made it out. Their voices speak through abandoned CB radios.

7. **The Keeper of the Freight**

A terrifying truth is revealed: the freight is more than cargo — it's alive, ancient, and bound to the driver until delivery. But where is the destination?

8. **Homebound**

The road home is treacherous. Time is broken, creatures crawl out of hidden folds, and the driver must decide whether to finish the delivery... or abandon it and risk the world learning what's inside.

---

## Chapter 1: The Final Dispatch

The clock on the dashboard read **11:43 PM**.

A quiet hum of fluorescent lights buzzed inside the lone dispatch office, deep in the industrial yard on the edge of nowhere. The rain was a thin mist, soft but soaking. It clung to the cracked windows of the structure, which looked like it hadn't been cleaned or visited by more than one man in weeks. Inside, **David Rourke**, a long-haul trucker in his early forties, sat with a steaming Styrofoam cup of black coffee, waiting.

He'd been on the road fifteen years. Seen enough weird roadside diners, too-bright gas stations, and dying towns to grow calluses on his soul. But something about **tonight** made his spine itch.

The dispatcher, a gaunt man with an unlit cigarette stuck to his bottom lip, slid a clipboard across the metal desk toward him. The paper was already damp, as if it had been printed hours ago and left out in the fog.

"Final load of the week, Rourke," the man said, not making eye contact.

"One trailer. One route. No stops."

"Where's the drop-off?" David asked.

The man didn't smile. "You'll know when you get there."

The manifest was unusual. No listed destination. Just GPS coordinates, and a final line: **"DO NOT OPEN UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES."**

David blinked. "What am I hauling?"

The dispatcher finally lit his cigarette, eyes hidden in the shadows of the office lamp.

"You don't want to know. You want to get paid."

David stood and rubbed the bridge of his nose. His gut told him to walk away — but the bonus for this job was nearly three times the usual rate. Enough to pay off repairs, maybe even take a month off. So, he nodded, grabbed the keys, and headed into the night.

---

The yard was dead quiet. A few motion-sensor lights buzzed to life as David approached his truck — an old but sturdy Kenworth W900 with a long nose, black as the sky, headlights like eyes squinting into the unknown.

The trailer was already hitched. Sealed with thick industrial latches and steel wires, tagged with **biohazard stickers**, but none of it looked recent. More like props on an old movie set.

"Someone's trying too hard," David muttered, but unease coiled in his stomach.

He climbed into the cab, adjusted his seat, and flicked on the **CB radio**. Static. He switched the channel, caught a burst of noise, then a whisper:

“...Midnight Freight... your shift begins...”

His hand froze over the dial.

The whisper was followed by silence. Then, with a rumble, the engine turned over. The headlights carved a tunnel through the misty night.

David eased the truck forward. The yard gates creaked open without anyone in sight.

The forgotten highway was waiting.

---

The road was narrow, unlit. Old route signs hung sideways, moss-eaten. The GPS kept glitching — recalculating every few minutes, even though there were no turns. It was just **one road**, endlessly forward.

The radio came alive again.

“Driver... do you copy? Freight marked *MDF25* dispatched from Zone 12. Time breach window: 3 hours, 47 minutes.”

David grabbed the mic. “Who is this? This is just a haul — I wasn’t told any of this nonsense.”

Silence.

Then, a different voice. A girl’s voice. Young. Childlike.

“Don't stop. They come when you stop.”

David snapped the radio off.

He didn’t believe in ghosts. He didn’t believe in angels. But he believed in survival. And something deep in him was starting to sense the boundaries of reality bending just enough to let **something else** peek through.

---

He checked his mirrors.

Still alone.

Then — a bump.

The entire trailer shook violently.  
He hit the brakes.

Silence.

Then — **scratching**. From inside the trailer.

Long, slow... deliberate.

David sat frozen in the cab, hand over the wheel, every hair on his arms standing tall. His breath misted the windshield.

His phone lit up. **NO SIGNAL**. But a notification blinked on the lock screen.

**“YOU LOOKED BACK. DON’T LOOK BACK.”**

He dropped the phone.

---

He forced the truck back into gear and drove.  
Faster now.

The road stretched endlessly ahead like a black ribbon on a dead planet.  
The freight thumped once more. Louder.

David dared to whisper, as much to himself as to the night.

“What the hell am I carrying?”

The only answer came in a low, echoing voice from the CB — not through static, but like it was sitting **in the cab** beside him.

“Something that doesn’t want to be delivered.”

## Chapter 2: Static and Shadows

David kept one hand locked on the wheel, the other hovering over the CB radio, unsure whether to switch it back on—or rip it from the dashboard.

The rain thickened, streaking across the windshield like veins on pale skin. His headlights barely pierced the night anymore. Trees loomed close on both sides of the road, their trunks warped and hunched as though recoiling from the path he traveled.

The GPS had gone silent. The screen still glowed dimly but no longer recalculated. It simply read:

**“MIDNIGHT MODE ENGAGED.”**

He didn't know what that meant. Didn't want to.

---

The trailer thudded again, a sound like a fist against metal. Then silence.

Then another thud.

And then... a long, low *growl*.

Not mechanical.

Not human.

Not natural.

David's heart hammered in his chest, but his hands stayed steady. Panic was the kind of passenger that killed you faster than speed. He flicked the side mirror down, angling it toward the back of the trailer.

**Nothing.**

Just his own headlights glinting faintly off the reflective striping of the cargo.

Still... the scratches on the trailer walls from before — they weren't there when he started.

---

He turned on the **in-cab camera monitor** that showed the interior of the trailer — required by BURG regulations.

The feed was black.

Not dark. Not dim. **Black.** Pitch void.

Then — a flicker. A single frame of something—wet, pale, coiled. Gone before his brain could register it.

He killed the monitor.

---

At mile marker **131**, the road forked. A signpost, completely rotted through, leaned crookedly to the left. There were no words. Just a symbol:



A black square. Familiar... but he didn't know why.

His GPS lit up again.

“LEFT.”

David hesitated. Right looked smoother. Wider. Safer.

“LEFT,” the voice repeated. Not typed — spoken. From inside the device.

He turned left.

---

The trees grew thicker. The road narrowed, cracked like dried skin. Fog rolled along the ground now, so dense he could barely see his front bumper.

And then — **figures**.

Standing in the fog, motionless.

Wearing outdated uniforms.

Eyes glowing faintly.

He slowed down.

One of them raised a hand. Not to wave — but to **signal him to stop**.

---

His foot twitched over the brake.

The CB crackled to life.

“DON'T. STOP.”

“That's not a checkpoint.”

David floored it.

The truck surged forward. As he passed them, the figures twisted. Their necks turned too far, skin stretching like wet cloth. Eyes wide and pupil-less.



One screamed — a garbled, digital screech like someone twisting a dying modem. It blasted through the radio even though it was off.

Then they were gone, swallowed by the mist.

---

David gritted his teeth. “This isn’t a haul. It’s a goddamn trap.”

He scanned the dash again. Everything was glitching. Fuel gauge: blinking. Odometer: stuck. Clock: 12:00 AM. Still. Eternal midnight.

Then his headlights illuminated **a man in the road.**

Wearing a trucker’s vest. Holding a flare.

David hit the horn — but the man didn’t move. Just raised the flare and pointed it behind David.

David glanced in the rearview.

**Something was following him.**

Not a vehicle. Not an animal.

**A shape.**

Seven feet tall. Dripping. Wrapped in chains that hissed like snakes dragging through gravel. Its mouth open wider than any human mouth should go.

But it wasn't running.

It was **walking**. Always walking. Yet somehow... gaining.

---

David swerved around the man, tires screeching on the wet road. The figure didn’t react. Just lowered the flare and faded into the black.

The radio whispered again.

“They can’t catch you. Unless you stop. Unless you wonder.”

David grunted. “Wonder?”

“Wonder what’s in the trailer.”

He didn’t answer.

He wouldn't ask.

But in his mind...  
He was already wondering.

---

The fog began to clear as he passed another marker — not a mile this time, but a word spray-painted across a collapsing billboard:

**WELCOME TO QUELL.**

Population: 0

The streetlights here were busted. Storefronts empty. Houses collapsed in on themselves. As if no one had lived here in decades... or centuries.

David didn't slow down. He couldn't.

Until — his headlights caught something familiar.

Another truck.

Parked. Empty.

Trailer still latched.

But scratched. Deep.

Three letters carved into the side:

**R.I.P.**

He didn't recognize the truck model — it was old, 80s or earlier. But the logo on the side of the trailer was unmistakable.

**BURG Logistics.**

His employer.

---

David kept driving. But something had changed.

The radio wouldn't turn off.

The GPS was gone.

His mirrors showed only darkness now.

And the thudding from the trailer had become **breathing**.

## Chapter 3: Freight Manifest Unknown

The rain had stopped. But somehow, things felt worse.

David's tires hissed on the cracked asphalt as he rolled deeper into Quell. No sign of life. No noise. No wind. Just silence so thick it pressed against his skin like a weight.

His dashboard flashed again. Not a warning light—just words on the GPS screen that had powered back on.

**Manifest Error.**

**Classified Cargo: UNDISCLOSED.**

**Security Protocol: Level IV Containment.**

“What the hell did they put in my truck?” David muttered.

He remembered signing a digital contract when he accepted the midnight run. It had been long, full of legalese. Something about restricted handling, no stops, and a waiver for psychological anomalies. He'd brushed it off as boilerplate legal garbage.

But now, he wasn't so sure.

---

He parked the rig on the edge of Quell's old industrial district. Abandoned warehouses stretched into the mist, gutted and rusting. His headlights illuminated graffiti scrawled in blood-red paint:

**“DON'T UNLOAD. DON'T UNLOCK. DON'T LOOK.”**

The message had been written over a faded BURG logo.

David sat still, engine idling. The breathing sound from the trailer hadn't stopped. It was rhythmic. Inhale... exhale... but too deep to be human.

He climbed down from the cab, boots squelching on the soaked pavement.

The back of the trailer was coated in dirt and rust. But fresh scratches sliced across the latch.

Something inside had tried to get out.

---

He reached for his phone to call dispatch. No signal. No bars. Just the spinning symbol of searching.

The CB radio hissed again.

“You're close,” a voice whispered. Not the same one from before.

“How do I get out of here?” David asked, voice tight.

“There’s no out, not till the freight is delivered.”

“Then tell me what the freight is.”

A pause.

Then static.

Then:

“You don’t want to know what they made you carry. But it knows **you**.”

---

David backed away from the trailer.

The trailer door **thumped**.

Once.

Then again—harder.

A long dent bloomed from the inside, warping the metal. Whatever was in there wasn’t just alive — it was **angry**.

He climbed back into the truck.

Started the engine.

“Drive,” the voice said. “Before it remembers what it is.”

---

David turned onto a road he hadn’t seen before. Narrow, unlit, flanked by gravestones. A long-forgotten cemetery stretched on both sides, names eroded by time.

He didn’t stop to read them.

---

After twenty minutes of slow crawling, the road opened into what used to be a **weigh station**. The building was in shambles, windows broken, computers inside shattered.

But the lights were on.

And in the center of the lot was another truck. Same build. Same trailer. Parked. Empty.

He pulled up beside it and stepped out.

There was a clipboard resting on its hood. The manifest sheet was soaked, smeared — but he could read one thing:

**FREIGHT ID: XF-11C | STATUS: ESCAPED**

A sound from inside the nearby trailer made David freeze.

It was the sound of laughter. **Childlike.**

It lasted three seconds. Then it turned into a scream. Inhuman. Layered with distortion.

David stumbled back to his rig.

As he turned the ignition, the GPS chirped:

**New Route Calculated: THE DROPOFF.**

The road forward twisted into darkness, but now it had a name.

---

Back on the road, the CB radio chirped.

“David.”

He jumped. That was his name. No one had used it yet.

“Who is this?”

“You passed the first checkpoint. But the cargo... it's getting curious.”

“Curious?”

“It’s watching you. It doesn’t like secrets it can’t uncover.”

David swallowed hard.

“What does that mean?”

“Don’t sleep. Don’t stop. And whatever you do... **don’t think about what it smells like.**”

David froze. Until then, he hadn’t noticed it.

Now... he did.

**Rotting roses. Wet fur. Burnt sugar. Ozone.**

He gagged.

The smell wasn’t from the cabin.

It was **inside his mind**.

---

He hit 70 mph, pushing the rig faster than it had ever gone.

The GPS recalculated again.

“3 Hours to Dropoff.”

“If you make it.”

The radio hissed.

“Others didn’t.”

---

In the side mirror, David saw headlights.

Another truck. Matching his. Black cab. Same plates.

**But it wasn’t on the road.**

It was beside the road.

Driving through the woods. Parallel. Matching his speed.

He watched it for miles.

Then it vanished.

No crash. No stop. Just... gone.

---

David reached over and opened the glovebox.

Inside was an envelope he hadn’t placed there.

Unmarked. Sealed.

He tore it open.

Inside was a photo. A family portrait.

**His family.** But the faces were scratched out.

And behind them... something large. A shape. Looming.

And in ink across the bottom:

**“It rode with you before.”**

---

David threw the photo out the window.

It fluttered once. Then caught fire midair.

He didn't look back.

But he could feel it.

**The freight was awake now.**

© Akash Rajaraman / BURG

## Chapter 4: Deadweight Delivery

The drop-off was still two hours away, but the road had started changing.

Not physically. Not in any way that a camera could pick up. But David could feel it. The lines on the asphalt flickered—sometimes stretching longer than normal, sometimes twitching slightly, as if reacting to him.

Every mile made the steering wheel heavier.

Every mile, the rig felt more like a coffin.

---

He drove through towns that shouldn't exist.

At 3:17 AM, he passed a gas station that glowed bright neon, untouched by time. Inside, the attendant was perfectly still—like a mannequin. But when David looked again, the man was waving at him with an unblinking smile.

At 3:22, he passed a church that had no entrance—just walls, a spire, and windows blackened from the inside.

At 3:26, the radio came on by itself again.

“Getting tired, David?”

The voice was female this time. Soft. Familiar.

Too familiar.

“You sound like my—”

“I'm not her,” the voice interrupted. “But it likes her face.”

David's chest tightened.

He reached for the volume knob. It wouldn't move.

“You shouldn't have taken this run,” the voice whispered. “You weren't supposed to remember.”

---

He hit the brakes.

The rig groaned as it stopped in front of an old **railroad crossing**, overgrown with vines. The signal lights flashed red, though there was no train, no tracks.



Then he heard it.

A **whistle**. Distant. Faint.

And then, growing louder.

He turned his head—and a massive black locomotive shot across the road. But it didn't ride tracks.

It **floated** a foot above the ground. Silent except for the scream of the whistle.

On each of its boxcars, scratched in rust-red paint, was a single word:

**REMEMBER**

**THE**

**WEIGHT**

**IS**

**YOURS**

Then the train was gone.

The lights stopped flashing.

But David could still hear the clattering in his ears.

---

He pressed the pedal again, his hands trembling on the wheel.

"You're not supposed to remember," the voice whispered again. "But you do, don't you?"

David's knuckles whitened.

Memories were surfacing—things he hadn't thought about in years.

A wreck.

A snow-covered bridge.

Another rig, twisted and burning.

Blood on the road.

A black trailer lying open.

And inside...

No. He couldn't remember more. The memory **wouldn't let him.**

---

Up ahead, the GPS glitched.

**Arrival Time: WHEN YOU'RE READY**

He passed a rusted-out checkpoint with no guards, only a flickering light and a steel pole arm stuck halfway down.

A sign read:

**BURG CARGO – Tier IV Transfer Hub**  
**No Entry Without Clearance.**

Yet the arm rose on its own.

The rig rolled through.

---

Inside the perimeter was an empty lot. Except... not quite.

Rows and rows of other rigs. Black. Identical to his.

Some with **blood smears** on the cabs.

Some with their doors wide open.

One had a man slumped over the steering wheel. Motionless. Skin pale gray.

David parked.

The trailer behind him **rumbled.**

The laughter was back—childlike, echoing.

He turned, facing the latch.

It was sliding open.

Not by his hand.

By something **inside.**

---

Before it cracked even an inch, a spotlight hit him from above.

**Drone.** Black, marked with the BURG triangle insignia.

A distorted voice boomed from the speakers:

“STEP AWAY FROM THE FREIGHT. THIS IS A LEVEL IV INTERVENTION.”

David backed away, hands up.

The trailer stopped moving.

The drone dropped a capsule, which burst into smoke. When it cleared, a figure in a hazmat suit stood where there had been nothing.

No footsteps. No sound.

Just presence.

“David?” the figure said.

It knew his name.

“You were supposed to forget.”

“Forget what?!”

“That you’ve done this before.”

---

The figure pressed a device to the trailer door. It hissed shut, locking again with bolts.

“We’ve been tracking the entity,” the figure said. “It keeps choosing you.”

“What is it?!”

The figure paused. Looked down.

“No one knows. Not truly. But it’s bound to memory. To guilt. To what you bury.”

“I didn’t bury anything—”

“Didn’t you?”

The figure reached into its pocket.

Pulled out a badge.

**David’s own badge.** His name, his old trucking ID. From years ago.

The company name?

## BURG BLACKLINE OPS — PSYLOGISTICS DIVISION

David stumbled back.

He had worked for them. Not a month ago. Years.

**He had made this delivery before.**

---

The figure stepped closer.

“You delivered it to Quell the first time. But it never stays there. It always comes back. Like guilt. Like nightmares. You sign the contract, over and over, and we make you forget.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re the only one it trusts. And the only one who survives.”

---

Behind him, the rig powered off. The lights dimmed.

The freight was resting. For now.

David looked around the lot.

All the other drivers... their rigs...

Each one had an empty manifest.

Each one bore his name, **scribbled over and over**.

He wasn’t the first version of himself.

He was just the latest iteration.

---

The figure handed him a new clipboard.

A fresh contract.

“Sign again,” they said. “Or it wakes up.”

David didn’t read it.

He signed.

And the GPS spoke once more:

**Route Calculated.**

**Next Delivery: One Week.**

**You won't remember. But it will.**

© Akash Rajaraman / BURG

## Chapter 5: The Town That Forgot Itself

David had no memory of starting the engine.

One blink he was standing in the lot, clipboard in hand. The next, the rig was already in motion, humming steadily as if nothing had happened. The miles ticked away like nothing was wrong. The black trailer behind him didn't make a sound.

Yet his palms sweated on the wheel.

Because something felt... different.

More **aware**.

As if the road was **watching** him now.

---

The town appeared on no map.

There were no road signs. No welcome banner. Just a narrow lane flanked by decayed trees, the kind that grew with roots above ground like gnarled fingers. The GPS displayed:

**Destination: NULL**

And yet, the rig turned on its own. The headlights flicked slightly—almost like they were blinking.

The name finally appeared as he passed a crumbling wooden post.

Carved crudely into it:

**WAKEMOUTH**

No population count.

No mayor.

No warnings.

Only silence.

---

Wakemouth was a ghost stitched together with memory.

The houses looked... **familiar**. But none had numbers.

Every window had been bricked up from the inside.

He passed a diner that flickered between two names—“**Lou’s Place**” and “**Mira’s Diner**”—as though the sign couldn’t remember which it was.

A school with a cracked bell tower that never stopped ringing.

A post office with no doors.

Then the streets narrowed. The rig crawled. The buildings closed in.

And still—no people.

---

Then David saw it: a single child, barefoot, in the middle of the road.

She was staring at him.

White dress. Hair covering her face.

He slammed the brakes.

The rig **screeched** to a halt inches away—but she didn’t flinch.

She raised a hand.

And pointed... **backwards**.

David looked in the side mirror.

The trailer door was **open**.

Not wide—just enough to let something out.

---

He leapt out of the cab, ran to the rear.

The seal wasn’t broken.

But the door hung open like a jaw mid-sentence.

He reached for it.

“Don’t,” a voice whispered from the alley beside him.

David spun.

The girl was gone. In her place stood an old man in a tattered postman’s uniform. His eyes were gray, but not blind. They were **empty**—like they’d had something taken out.

“You brought it here again,” the man muttered.

“What *is* this town?” David asked.

The man didn’t answer.

Instead, he pulled out a rusted, bloodstained clipboard. The same as David’s. Same logo.

**BURG BLACKLINE OPS.**

“Every driver delivers here once,” the old man said. “And then they forget.”

“What am I delivering?!”

The man laughed—a dry, broken sound.

“Memory.”

“That doesn’t make any sense—”

“This town isn’t cursed, son,” he interrupted. “It’s full.”

“Full of what?”

“The things nobody wanted to remember.”

---

The wind picked up. With it came voices—not whispers, but **shouts**.

From every boarded window, every sealed door.

Names. Places. Screams.

“Let me out!”

“You forgot me!”

“You signed the contract!”

David turned, stumbling backward.

The houses themselves were **breathing** now. Exhaling smoke. Brick pulsing like muscle. Asphalt rippling beneath his feet.

He ran back to the rig.

The cab door slammed shut before he reached it.

From the side mirror, he saw someone in the driver’s seat.



Himself.

---

The other David turned and looked at him.

Smiled.

And drove off, the trailer following like a silent shadow.

David chased it. Shouted. But the rig disappeared into the fog just past the edge of town.

The streets fell silent again.

Only the echo of his scream remained.

---

Behind him, the postman spoke:

“Now you stay until someone else comes.”

“No—there has to be a way out.”

“There was. Before you delivered.”

David stood in the street, heart hammering.

The trailer was gone.

But the freight had been **delivered**.

And this town, **Wakemouth**, would never forget it again.

Because now **he was part of it**.

## Chapter 6: Manifest Echoes

David sat on the cracked curb of Wakemouth's main street, hands trembling, heartbeat echoing in a rhythm that no longer felt like his own.

He didn't remember falling asleep.

But he **woke up screaming**.

The same dream. Again.

Except this time... it wasn't just a dream.

It was a **delivery manifest**.

Burned into his vision.

Names. Places. Dates. Each line pulsating like veins on a corpse.

All under one header:

**BLACKLINE OPS – MIDNIGHT FREIGHT – INTERNAL TRANSFER ONLY**

And stamped in red at the top corner:

**Manifest Echo #42-D**

He looked down.

A clipboard was in his lap.

---

The town had changed overnight.

Wakemouth was now **active**.

Shadows behind curtains. Flickering lights in windows. The bell tower still rang, but now in sync with something else—a *chant* maybe, just beneath the wind.

The townspeople had returned.

Or had they always been here?

They walked without looking up. Faces blurred like smeared paint, some wearing twisted versions of postal uniforms, others in tattered suits with name tags that read things like "Client," "Witness," or "Refused."

They passed David like he wasn't there.

But he could **hear** them now.

Not their voices.

Their **thoughts**.

“Don’t open it.”

“They always open it.”

“He’s already changed.”

---

The clipboard buzzed in his hands.

The next delivery.

Except—he hadn’t left Wakemouth.

The destination this time:

**DAVID THORN – INTERNAL DROP**

**Location: MEMORY VAULT 3**

He blinked.

“Internal?”

How could he be delivering to himself?

He flipped the page.

And what he saw made his blood freeze.

---

There were pages... **written in his own handwriting.**

Notes. Scribbles. Coordinates. Diagrams of roads that didn’t exist.

There was a list of deliveries, each more horrifying than the last:

- 08/15 – *The Whispering Dollhouse*
- 09/03 – *The Looping School Bus (Payload: Regret)*
- 10/11 – *Wakemouth Memory Reclamation*

Next to each: a tick mark. Completed.

Each one signed with:

**D. Thorn, Operative Class 3A**  
**CONTRACTED UNTIL FULL MEMORY PURGE**

He dropped the clipboard.

“No,” he whispered. “I never signed this.”

But his signature was there.

Repeated dozens of times.

---

From the alley, a voice called out.

The old postman again. Except now, his face was whole.

He looked *younger*. Sharper. Like the town had *fed* him something.

“Remember yet?”

David backed away. “None of this makes sense—”

“It’s not supposed to,” the man said. “The freight isn’t what you *carry*. It’s what you *lose*.”

“Then what did I deliver?!”

“Everything you didn’t want to remember.”

The words hit like a punch.

David’s mind buckled. Images crashed into his skull: hospital corridors, a woman’s scream, blood on a car windshield, a child’s toy on a rain-slicked road.

And **a contract**.

Signed in red ink.

---

“You chose this,” the postman said. “You were the first to volunteer.”

David shook his head. “Why would I forget something like that?”

The man’s expression softened.

“Because sometimes the only way to survive grief... is to ship it somewhere else.”

“But it always comes back.”

A pause.

“You think this is your first delivery?”

David looked down.

The clipboard now showed 143 completed drops.

He couldn’t breathe.

---

The rig returned that night.

Headlights slicing the fog.

But this time, no one was in the driver’s seat.

The engine purred patiently.

Waiting.

David approached it, like a dog returning to its master.

The clipboard was back in his hand.

One last note had been added:

**NEXT DESTINATION: THE GIRL IN WHITE**

**Package: REMORSE**

He looked up.

And saw the barefoot child from before, standing at the edge of town.

Waiting.

Not afraid.

Just... *waiting*.

---

He stepped into the cab.

The seat adjusted to him like it remembered.

The door closed without a sound.

And the rig rolled forward.

David didn't touch the wheel.

He didn't have to.

The freight knew the way.

© Akash Rajaraman / BURG

## Chapter 7: Dead Mile

They say the road never ends.

But **this one did**.

It ended in the middle of nowhere.

No signposts. No markers. Just asphalt decaying into a sea of dirt and ash, like the world had been peeled back and underneath it... was nothing.

David sat in the idling rig, his hands locked to the wheel—not by force, but by **habit**. Like he'd been driving this road for centuries.

The GPS blinked a single word in red:

**DEAD MILE**

And under it, in small flickering letters:

**YOU ARE THE CARGO**

---

The girl in white was gone.

She'd vanished somewhere along the route—maybe at the third stop, when the trees started whispering in reverse. Or maybe she was never there to begin with.

David wasn't sure anymore.

He remembered seeing her in mirrors. In windows. In the rearview, sometimes mouthing something he couldn't hear. A name, maybe.

His name?

The line between his memories and the freight's had begun to dissolve. Dreams bled into waking moments. Objects in the truck changed between blinks—sometimes a crate, sometimes a **coffin**.

Sometimes... **a hospital bed**.

---

He stepped out onto the road.

It crumbled underfoot, but didn't fall away. It held him like it was waiting for something.

Then he saw them.

People.

Standing in the middle of the dead mile.

Not walking. Not moving. Just... waiting.

Each figure faced him.

Some wore BURG uniforms. Some wore medical scrubs. Some wore funeral black.

And he knew every one of them.

Because they were all **passengers**.

Faces he'd seen on ID tags. Riders he didn't remember picking up. Patients he didn't know he transported.

A father.

A girl with a bike.

A boy with a broken leg.

An old man with war medals.

His mother.

And at the center, one figure that made his knees buckle:

**His wife.**

---

She didn't speak.

Just stared.

Eyes full of oceans he never knew how to cross.

David fell to his knees.

"I'm sorry."

No reply. But her expression cracked.

And so did the world.

The sky split like glass. The clouds turned upside down. The rig screamed like a dying animal. Freight compartments burst open along the trailer, each one filled with **echoes**.

Laughter. Screams. Arguments. Apologies.

Each a memory.



Each one he had sealed away.

Each one **delivered**.

---

The passengers moved, finally.

But not toward him.

They walked past. Through him. Their bodies dissolving into vapor as they reached the end of the dead mile, vanishing into the mist.

All except **her**.

She approached slowly.

Kneeling beside him.

Touching his shoulder.

Whispering one word:

“Remember.”

And then she too dissolved, like fog burned off by morning sun.

---

The rig roared back to life on its own.

The manifest reprinted itself on the dash.

**Final Drop Confirmed**

**Recipient: DAVID THORN**

**Package: ACCEPTANCE**

**Status: PENDING**

He climbed back in.

Exhausted.

But awake.

---

As the wheels turned, the dead mile reformed beneath him.

Each foot of road behind him collapsed into the void.

The rig wasn't taking him somewhere now.

It was taking him **home**.

Wherever that was.

© Akash Rajaraman | BURG

## Chapter 8: The Return Manifest

The engine no longer purred.

It breathed.

With every mile forward, it exhaled cold mist from the vents, fogging up the windshield as if the rig itself feared what lay ahead.

David Thorn's hands trembled on the wheel. Not from fear anymore—but from **recognition**.

The road didn't stretch in front of him.

It **looped**.

Back.

Always back.

Not in time, but in *weight*.

Every passenger.

Every manifest.

Every sin.

They weren't deliveries.

They were **returns**.

---

The dashboard lights flickered and changed—no longer red or green. They pulsed in an unnatural **violet**, like bruised stars blinking in code.

The screen blinked:

**RETURN MANIFEST ACTIVE**  
**FINAL DESTINATION: THE WARD**

David's blood turned to ice.

That word. **Ward**.

Not a hospital.

Not a station.

A place deeper.  
Darker.  
Somewhere the freight was never supposed to go back to.

---

The rig's windows blacked out.

Not tinted. Not cracked.

Just... **gone**.

And when they cleared again—seconds? hours later?—he was somewhere **else**.

The road was gone.

He was on a causeway above a black sea, lit only by fireflies that whispered.

Yes—**whispered**.

Each whisper was a name. And each name, he realized, was someone he never remembered delivering.

Someone who **shouldn't** have been forgotten.

His earpiece crackled to life.

“Manifest updated, driver,” came the voice.

A voice he hadn't heard since training.

A voice that belonged to **someone dead**.

“Your final return is overdue.”

“They're waiting.”

---

Ahead, something pulsed in the sky.

Not a star. Not a light.

A **hole**.

A perfect circle of nothing that drank light instead of giving it.

The road climbed toward it.

A ramp to nowhere.

---

As the rig climbed, compartments in the trailer began to open on their own.

Not physically. Not visibly.

But in **him**.

Each chamber burst like a dying lung. Memories he didn't know were buried exploded through his mind:

- The sealed door at BURG HQ.
- The security footage with no timestamps.
- The whispered phrase:

*"Don't ask what you're carrying."*

And above all:

- The delivery signed in blood.

**Recipient: The Ward**

**Package: Human Remnant**

**Driver: D. Thorn**

His signature.

His hand.

His ink.

His guilt.

---

The rig neared the black hole in the sky.

And from it, something **looked back**.

Eyes. Too many. All blinking in **unison**.

Not eyes of creatures.

**Eyes of versions.**

Different Davids.

Screaming.

Begging.

Bleeding.

Laughing.

And behind them... freight compartments—stretching into the dark like infinite reflections.

“You’ve delivered everyone else,” the voice said.

“Now it’s your turn.”

---

The truck’s brakes hissed on their own.

The dashboard printed one final slip:

**Manifest: RETURNED**

**Driver: ACCEPTED**

**Cargo: CLASSIFIED**

**Next Route: ???**

The rig launched forward.

Into the hole.

---

There was no sound.

Only **knocking**.

Soft at first.

Then louder.

Then **from inside**.

David turned—

And saw the trailer door slowly creaking open.

From the inside.

“David,” came a voice.

Familiar.

Wrong.

“We’re not done yet.”

The door opened wide.

Something **stepped out**.

Something that looked like him.

But older.

**Wounded.**

And it smiled.

“Ready for the next run?”

---

**To be continued...**

*Volume II: Manifest Lost – Coming Soon.*